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## From Power Sharing to Power being Shared Out

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# From Power sharing to Power being shared out

John Barry

The recent UK election has thrown up a number of surprises. One is the monumental mistake that Theresa May made in thinking a snap election would see her gain a large majority and thus legitimacy for a 'hard Brexit'. The second, and related, is that her failure to secure enough MPs has left the Conservatives in need of securing support from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party for a minority Conservative government in London. This has ramifications not just for UK politics, but is an unexpected and potentially destabilising issue in the negotiations to form a power-sharing executive in Belfast which have been ongoing since March this year.

This year's UK general election will be remembered as a disaster for Theresa May's Conservatives and (to a lesser extent) Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party (SNP). And while Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party enjoyed an extraordinary resurgence (and the Conservatives in Scotland), it is perhaps Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) that appears to have had the best result of all. Within Northern Ireland the DUP took 10 of the 18 seats (up from 8 in 2015), and roundly defeated their main rivals the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Alliance Party to consolidate their position both as Northern Ireland's largest party, and as the largest party representing Unionism. But while this electoral performance was an excellent result for the DUP, it was the failure of the Conservatives to win an overall majority that catapulted them from the margins of Westminster politics to its epicentre. With the DUP's success, Theresa May has been forced to seek a 'supply and confidence' deal with them, which has both led people and most sections of the English media scrambling to figure out who and what the DUP are. And by turns expressing surprise, horror, and incredulity at what they have discovered.

## Hardening attitudes

While the DUP enjoyed success in the Westminster elections, they were not alone. Sinn Féin (SF), their erstwhile 'enemy' and partner in the Northern Ireland Assembly (its devolved legislature) also increased their tally to 7 – up from 4, also defeating their main rivals in the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). All in all, the June election continued the electoral dynamic for the two ethnic champions of Ulster that first began in the March elections to the Northern Irish Assembly when both SF and the DUP increased their number of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) at the expense of their intra-community rivals, and making for an increasingly polarised and sectarian political atmosphere in Northern Ireland.

The outflanking of the more moderate unionist and nationalist parties (UUP, SDLP, and Alliance) means that SF and the DUP continue to be the dominant parties in Northern Ireland, reflecting in many respects the triumph of the extremes over the centre that first began with the much lauded sectarian power-sharing Executive of 2007. Then, with the ascendancy of the 'chuckle brothers', Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, rather than constructing an inclusive consociational model of good

governance, power has been effectively 'shared out' between SF and the DUP for a number of years, and the elections of 2017 further consolidate that dynamic, of a 'shared out' future. At first glance and based on the June poll results, increasingly Northern Ireland looks like its heading towards a One party Janus faced system, where each ethnic champion publicly appeals to its sectarian base for electoral power by blaming the 'Other' for all the Assembly's faults while privately collaborating with the very same 'Other' to ensure they remain the dominant power in the political process. This shared out governance model has been helped by a combination of changing party political dynamics and calculations, personalities, and the issue of the implications of Brexit. For example, SF who habitually opposed the European Union, and did not campaign in the Brexit referendum, now claim to be the leaders of the anti-Brexit movement while the DUP who campaigned for a hard Brexit now quietly counsel the Conservative Party for a soft Brexit.

However, while much has been made of the consociational model of Proportional Representation (Single Transferable Vote) government in creating this 'shared out' sectarian future it also needs saying that the 'First Past the Post' system used for Westminster elections has also increased the sectarian polarisation, effectively redrawing the border to leave the DUP representing the eastern part of Northern Ireland, from East Londonderry to Strangford, while SF now represent the border counties and the sectarian redoubt of West Belfast. Thus the (relative) pluralism of the Assembly election where – notwithstanding that the DUP and SF took the majority of seats in the 90 member chamber (55 between them) – there remain MLAs from UUP, SDLP, Alliance, Greens, and People before Profit, who attempt to reflect the more complex and rich diversity of the Northern Ireland population.

The polarising effects of the 'First Past the Post' system can be seen most vividly in the South Belfast constituency that in March 2017 elected 5 MLAs from 5 different parties (including Clare Bailey of the Green Party), but in June returned only one elected representative from the DUP (and to add to the irony: this constituency is home to some of the wealthiest and intelligent people living in Northern Ireland, as it takes in much of the business, academic and student population and was the strongest Remain constituency: yet is now represented by a Brexit MP, a party some of whose politicians believe the earth was created in 7 days, 4000 years ago, and deny climate change, reproductive rights, and gay marriage.

With the increasing failure of SF and the DUP to deliver good government, the May 2016 Assembly election saw the emergence of a formal opposition, comprised of the UUP and SDLP, hoping to oppose the vice-like grip the 'shared out' duopolistic power-sharing executive. SF and the DUP, together with an independent MLA, appointed as Minister of Justice, formed a new Executive and proceeded to govern without criticising each other. However, in the absence of SDLP cover, SF was increasingly exposed in failing to deliver for their community, so much so, they agreed to hand welfare powers back to Westminster despite many of their constituencies continuing to suffer from high levels of poverty and welfare dependency. Even when charges of corruption were levelled against the DUP, first through the National Management Asset Agency (NAMA) and then the Renewable Heat incentive scandal, SF remained steadfast with their DUP partners.

## The collapse of the executive

The collapse of the Northern Ireland executive in January 2017 was triggered by the resignation of the late Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness as Deputy First Minister. This automatically meant the resignation of the First Minister, the DUP's Arlene Foster (given the Office of First and Deputy First Minister is one composite position). Outwardly SF collapsed the executive due to the controversy around the maladministration of the Renewable Heating Incentive (RHI) scheme, a UK wide scheme managed in Northern Ireland by Arlene Foster when minister for the Department of Trade and Industry. Foster has denied any wrongdoing, but the scheme will end up costing taxpayers in Northern Ireland an estimated £500m. From a green political point of view (and one expressed by Steven Agnew, leader of the Greens in the Assembly) a major problem this has created is a public (and political) scepticism around such low carbon energy schemes. So, not only have we the problem of political instability and an increasing sectarian political situation in Northern Ireland, but the 'delegitimisation' of state subsidies for the low carbon energy transition. Prolonging the 'carbon lock in' of the Northern Ireland energy system, already one of the most imported fossil fuel dependent in Europe.

From a Green Party perspective one could say that inwardly, SF feared the exposure of their political ineptitude and reliance on neoliberal policies in Northern Ireland, would badly affect their chances of electoral success in the Republic of Ireland, particularly as they were impoverishing the poor in Northern Ireland in much the same way as their political opponents in the Republic of Ireland were doing. Opponents, such as Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, were increasingly pointing this contradiction out to the Southern Irish electorate. Therefore, the Renewable Heat Incentive (or the 'cash for ash') scandal enabled SF to express their frustration with the 'arrogance' and 'disrespect' the DUP were showing to Nationalists (exemplified by a DUP minister denying a small amount of funding to an Irish language group during the Christmas recess). This break with their DUP partners, and adaptation of opposition proposals to hold a public enquiry into the RHI scandal together with the campaign to restore funding for the Irish language groups allowed SF to reinvent themselves as the opposition rather than a part of the very government responsible for the crisis. Foster's refusal to stand aside while a SF/DUP designed enquiry into the RHI then led to the March 2017 Assembly elections.

## The March Assembly elections

In these elections Sinn Féin did very well – helped by comments from Foster around Nationalists being 'crocodiles' always wanting more – and the nationalist vote came out en masse. This led to two extremely significant results. The first was that Sinn Féin were only one seat behind the DUP (27 to 28). The second was that overall, Unionist parties (DUP, UUP, TUV) were no longer a majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time (and the DUP loss of MLAs meant they no longer had the power to issue a petition of concern, used to stop reform of social policy, such as same sex marriage or abortion). This is the important backstory and context to the June Westminster campaign in Northern Ireland. And in almost overtaking the DUP, SF came close to taking the First Minister position. This would have meant

that Northern Ireland (as part of the United Kingdom) would then have had an Irish republican, ideologically committed to the reunification of Ireland and therefore the effective abolition of Northern Ireland, as the most senior elected representative and (joint) head of government of Northern Ireland.

If the March elections were a success for Sinn Féin, in the shared out sectarian voting fields of Northern Ireland this electoral result was interpreted as a 'warning' to unionists that they too needed to mobilise and get the vote out. Hence a consistent theme of the Westminster elections was to 'get the unionist vote out' – round two as it were of the DUP vs. SF contest. This is why polarisation and greater sectarian party division are the outcomes of the June election – the DUP convinced unionist voters to not back the UUP in particular but themselves as the strongest unionist party to 'take on' Sinn Féin. Here one must understand the two most important features of post-Agreement Northern Irish politics.

The first is the long-standing position that here we vote to keep someone out as opposed to vote someone in (though of course such tactical voting was also in evidence in other parts of the UK, but its long been part of the political DNA of politics here). The second, and this is perhaps unique to Northern Ireland, we tend to elect 'negotiators not legislators'. That is, parties (exemplified by the DUP and SF) portray themselves as locked into a permanent opposition with 'the other' and that they (unlike the UUP or SDLP) are the 'strongest tribunes' to go head to head with the strongest tribunes from the other side. This leads to some interesting dynamics.

Essentially SF and the DUP need each other (and not just because of the mandatory power-sharing arrangements of the 1998 Agreement and operation of the Executive). Both parties need the other to 'scare' their own voters and prospective voters into supporting them. Here both SF and the DUP can be viewed as 'ethnic entrepreneurs' skilfully manipulating or creating the fears of 'the other' to increase their own vote, to enhance their own democratic mandate (both parties like to talk a lot about their mandates and demand others recognise and respect these) in order to enter into negotiations. So 'permanent negotiation' would not be a completely inaccurate description of Northern Irish party politics since the 1998 Agreement and especially since the 2007 St Andrews Agreement.

### Impacts of the March election

Within unionism, the results of the Westminster election has led to calls for 'one unionist party' i.e. the DUP. Jim Shannon of the DUP who won with an almost 20,000 majority in the Strangford constituency, used his victory speech to state, "I think the people of Strangford would like to see one unionist party. Maybe it's just time that we looked towards how we could make that happen". Echoing this a former chair of the UUP, who presided over its reorganisation of its base, and recruitment of Mike Nesbitt, then decried the UUP's loss of contact with its base, and Nesbitt's rise to lead the party, has claimed that the UUP is now a busted flush and unionism needs to rally around the DUP. This same individual, who now chairs the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), a group set up to represent post-ceasefire loyalist paramilitary groups, also condemned the UUP for refusing to endorse the LCC call to vote for DUP candidates in the Westminster election.

For Sinn Féin, the election of its 7 abstentionist MPs are viewed by Gerry Adams as indicating that “nationalism in the north has turned its back on Westminster”. Sinn Féin also used their victory to promote the idea that it was as a clear rejection of the SDLP policy of nationalist MPs taking their seats. So just as the DUP wiped out the UUP at Westminster, SF wiped out the SDLP. Apart from SF abstentionism, meaning they have helped gift the ‘king-maker’ role to the DUP in terms of the ‘confidence and supply’ arrangement between them a minority Conservative government, the other implication of SF’s victory is that for the first time since 1966 northern Irish nationalists will not have any representation in the House of Commons. The only Northern Irish voices now will be unionist ones.

### An uncertain future

So, currently there is no functioning government in Northern Ireland, and at time of writing the ‘mood music’ is not good for its restoration, and Northern Ireland is again braced for more negotiations, missed deadlines and possibility of more elections (on top of the three we have had since May 2016, not including the EU Referendum). But the wide political context has become much more sectarian, divisive, and accusatory, all perhaps inevitable results of Northern Ireland moving so much more clearly from the vision of a power-sharing executive to one where the two ‘ethnic entrepreneur’ parties ‘share out’ power between them.

In terms of the Brexit negotiations, not having an executive means there is no collective ‘Northern Irish’ voice at the table. The DUP-Conservative arrangement would mean at most that a unionist (and therefore pro-Brexit) position would ‘represent’ Northern Ireland (which voted to remain). But there are also ramifications for the Republic of Ireland in terms of its Brexit position, its support for ‘special status’ for Northern Ireland and desire for a ‘soft border’, all of which would be advanced if there was a functioning Northern Irish government as part of the UK negotiating team. And a functioning Northern Irish government could enable the Irish government to shape, if not stop, the increasing calls for a destabilising ‘border poll’, which is adding fuel to the growing political sectarian divisions laid bare in both the March and June elections in Northern Ireland.